

"I've missed the bus..."



UNFORGETTABLE

REETA REWINDS

"Yeh raatein nayi purani, aate jaate kehti hai koi kahani...". Reeta Bhaduri's song from *Julie* echoes her life. Snubbing advances, Reeta Bhaduri had to pay for it heavily by being relegated to character roles...

It has been 27 long and eventful years in tinsel town for Reeta Bhaduri. Yet she refuses to call it a day. Her best friends to date remain the greasepaint and the camera. And that's the way she wanted it.

Born in a sheltered Bengali family in Indore, the family moved to the land of dreams—Mumbai, where Reeta did her schooling and college. It was a family well-entrenched in the fine arts. "My mother Chandrima Bhaduri was a well-known theatre personality. So the acting germ got into me at a very young age." Consequently, she joined the Film Institute and passed with flying colours in 1973. She stood second losing the gold medal to Shabana Azmi who happened to be her roommate. Others in her batch included Mithun Chakraborty, Zarina Wahab, Shailendra Singh, Preeti Ganguly, Kanwaljeet and Neelam Mehra.

The institute tag did help her bag a couple of lead roles, but it didn't help keep the wolves at bay... After 15 days of shooting for her first film *Zindadil*

opposite Rishi Kapoor, she was thrown out. Reason: she refused to succumb to the director's 'demands'. Other producers too backed out and Reeta was back to square one.

Wiser yet not yielding to the industry dictates, she decided to go South. "My class-mate Mohan who had become a popular star down South introduced me to Setu Madhavan, who was on the lookout for a fresh face opposite Kamal Haasan for his Malayalam film *Kanyakumari*. Thankfully I fit the bill. My first screen appearance occurred in 1975."

Despite the average success of her maiden film down South, Reeta was unable to make a breakthrough in Hindi films. That's when Setu Madhavan again came to her aid "He was planning to remake his hit Malayalam film *Chatkari* in Hindi titled *Julie*. I was quite taken up by the role he offered to me — that of the Hindu friend of the main protagonist Julie. I immediately signed on the dotted line without giving it a second thought.

"Shooting for *Julie* was like a picnic. It was great fun working with Laxmi, Vikram, Nadiraji, Om Prakashji, Jalal Agha and the others. I remember us laughing our hearts out watching the late Jalal Agha eat. My mother, who had accompanied me on the shoot, was very fond of cooking. On our outdoor at Shornoor in Kerala, Jalal would literally long for the break to be announced so that he could gorge on mom's fish delicacies! It was a sight to see him eat: he wouldn't utter a word during his entire meal and would perspire profusely all the time!"

Another person whom Reeta fondly remembers is Mumtaz. "If you remember *Aaina* revolved around Mumtaz who played a girl burdened by the responsibility of her eight siblings (I played one of them). Mumtaz would take her on-screen character very seriously, off-screen as well. During the break she would take us youngsters along with her and play cards, dumb charades and other games. It was unbelievable that an actress of her stature would go out of her way to mingle with us freely."

Reeta's first Hindi release in 1976 was *Julie*. A bold theme, a memorable music track and strong performances assured full houses and marked the beginning of several careers in Hindi films — music director Rajesh Roshan and singer Preeti Sagar along with Reeta. Alas, the success of this film proved to be Reeta's undoing, as well... "Although my role was important and also garnered a lot of appreciation, I got stuck with the sister tag since I played the hero Vikram's sister."

Setting the seal on her fate was the release of *Aaina*. The behan-tag stuck fast. *Vishwanath*, *Udhaar Ka Sindoor* and such films followed.

"There were a few pleasant exceptions, though," Reeta interjects, "like my roles in *Kahani Phoolan Ki* and *Bezubaan*. Here I played Naseeruddin Shah's wife who blackmails her friend Reena Roy. I had a strong scene in the climax, which remains close to my heart."

A few more sisterly roles followed. At this time, a friend offered me the lead role in a Gujarati film that his uncle was making. Not wanting to repeat the mistake of refusing lead roles in regional cinema, I immediately accepted. *Lakhon Pholaani* was a huge success and I never looked back," says Reeta about her Gujarati film career. At that time, she had even shifted base to Gujarat.

She went on to do 96 films in Gujarati, including big hits like *Kashi No Dikro*, *Maiyo Ni Chunri*, *Sansar Chakra* and *Vaya Virangan*, which was her home production. "Here I got the roles I couldn't get in Hindi films. I also bagged the Gujarat State best actress award for five years consecutively." Her very successful eight-year stint in the Gujarat film industry, dried up in 1983-84. Gujarat was hit by a severe famine, which virtually downed the shutters of the entertainment industry.

Back in Mumbai, this time round there was television beckoning with good roles. "Rakesh Chaudhary offered me 'Bante Bigadte' and I accepted it. Then there were some fine serials with the late Shridhar Kshirsagar like 'Khandaan',

'Stree', 'Anand', 'Chauraha' and 'Gulmohar West'. Ever since I have never looked back..."

Reeta's television repertoire includes her roles in 'Amaanat', 'Virasat', 'Hudd Kar Di' and 'Kaun Apna Kaun Paraya' among others.

Now films with well-defined character roles is what she goes for... "When I am doing good roles on television, I wouldn't like to take on insignificant parts in films. I've done a few interesting character roles in films like *Kabhie Haan Kabhie Naa*, *Ghar Ho To Aisa*, *Hero No.1* and *Raja*. "It was the happiest moment of my life when I was nominated for a popular annual award in the Best Supporting Actress category for *Raja*," she says with a smile. "When Indu (Indra Kumar) offered me the role, he was honest enough to tell me that the film had a powerful scene only in the climax. I was very impressed with his frankness and did the role."

A similar thing happened while doing *Ghar Ho To Aisa*. "I have always had this simple girl-next-door image - I have a very ordinary Indian face which is right for goody-goody parts. I was naturally apprehensive about playing the vicious sister of Anil Kapoor in the film. Director Kalpataru however was sure I could do a good job of the role and his conviction paid off."

Speaking of her contemporaries, she remembers them with awe... "Farida Jalal and Aruna Irani were years senior to me. Though there was healthy competition between us, there was never any vindictiveness." Here she recalls an incident that occurred on the sets of *Jalsundari*, a fantasy film, which unfortunately never saw the light of day... "There was a dance competition between Padma Khanna and me and I was supposed to win it since I was the heroine of the film. Being pitted against such a great dancer, I was naturally nervous. Sensing this, Padmaji called me aside and gently said, 'Don't worry beta, main dheela (lightly) naachoongi, tum josh mein nacho. You look superior'. This gesture towards a rank newcomer remains a fond memory."

L—his is as far as her professional life goes. Personally speaking Reeta made many friends in the industry. "Most of my friends are from the institute. Mithun is a good friend, so also Benjamin Gilani, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah. We make it a point to meet at least once every month or two and catch up. I know I can always rely on them for support in times of need."

Friendships were fine but love was definitely out as far as the industry men were concerned. "Somehow no one out here took me for a woman!" she laughs loudly "That's because I was a tom-boy. I never sported those coy, shy looks. I was my male co-stars' buddy, so to speak. Many a time, I would end up fixing dates with girls for them!"

Not that love was alien to her... "Of course I had my share of affairs which is quite normal. Somehow I didn't fancy any man enough to marry him. Also I feel that there is a certain age one should get married at. During this period, I was busy with my career. It was not a priority then and today too, it isn't. I am probably just not the settling kind and today I have missed the bus," comes the frank retort.

Spanning three decades, the industry has witnessed various changes. "Earlier the actor would run after the director, today it is the other way round. The equation has changed entirely as a result of which there is no discipline left. It's also disgusting to see some of these popular actors showing little concern to acknowledge the presence of greats like Waheedaji, Nandaji and others when we still rise to greet our seniors."

Other than that, it has been a pleasure trip for Reeta, so to speak. "Being in the industry itself is a major high. Each day is a new discovery for the artiste in me; a new fulfilment, a new craving to give a better performance. My best shot is yet to come!"

A friendship that dates back to the Film Institute days

